

Interview with George E. Lichtblau

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GEORGE E. LICHTBLAU

Interviewed by: James F. Shea

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Q: Good morning, George. It's a pleasure to have you here. My name is Jim Shea. As you know, we have been friends for a long time, and we have both been in the Labor Attach# Program. Could you tell us, George, how you got into the Labor Attach# Corps?

LICHTBLAU: Thank you, Jim. It's my pleasure to undertake these interviews under the Labor Diplomacy Oral History Project. I've been looking forward to participating in this project for some time. As you know, I also have a long record of being interested and having worked in the international labor field. So let me give you a bit of the background of my history and experience.

I got interested in the international labor field when I studied for my master's degree in labor economics at the graduate faculty at the New School of Social Research in New York, where I was accepted under the G.I. Bill of Rights in 1946 and graduated in 1949. Reflecting my growing interest in the international labor field, my choice for a thesis topic was the story of the World Federation of Trade Unions, also known as the WFTU.

In the course of my research and study I also started to get involved and in contact with people in the international section of the International Ladies' Garment Workers' Union,

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ILGWU, which was then run by Jay Lovestone, who was working with Irving Brown. They and a fellow student who was already working in the International Department helped me to get material on the developments in the WFTU and particularly the split which led the American Federation of Labor (AFL) to withdraw from that organization and then launch the International Confederation of Free Trade Unions (ICFTU), which marked the growing involvement of the American labor movement in international affairs, and particularly its Cold War aspects.

Following my graduation, I was hired by the Division of Foreign Labor Conditions [in the U.S. Department of Labor], which was part of the Bureau of Labor Statistics and then headed by Faith Williams. There I was assigned first to some studies on the developing status of international labor movements, not only the WFTU and the ICFTU, but also the Christian Trade Unions and other emerging regional groups in Asia and Africa.

Then I was assigned to do some intelligence research studies which were financed by the Central Intelligence Agency (CIA), but under contract assigned to the Department of Labor and later also to the Bureau of Intelligence and Research (INR) at the Department of State. I was hired at the Department of State in 1952.

Q: George, could you tell us how you came into the State Department? What was the mechanism?

LICHTBLAU: Because of my work in the Department of Labor on classified material, I had established contacts with some research people in INR and they had a Division of Functional Intelligence and decided to establish the position of a labor analyst. In recognition of my previous work, I was hired in the summer of 1952, and I continued to work in INR as the labor analyst until 1963.

In 1963, I was invited to change over from the Civil Service to the Foreign Service Reserve. At the same time I was awarded a Rockefeller Fellowship to do a study on the status of African trade unions. Under my Rockefeller Fellowship, I spent several months

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traveling, first going to Europe, where I did research in London and then in Paris and for a while also in Geneva and Rome. I then traveled all over Africa. At that time, I was also receiving considerable help from people like Irving Brown and the International Department of the AFL-CIO who sent out messages to their various people already working in Africa to help me in my program.

At the end of the year that I was on leave on my Rockefeller Grant, I wrote a book called *The Politics of African Trade Unionism* which was published by Praeger. On my return, I was then offered my first overseas Foreign Service assignment to Abidjan, Ivory Coast, with responsibility for most of the French-speaking West African countries.

Q: George, in addition to your African travels, what sort of briefing were you given on general State Department procedures and overall policy before you left for your post?

LICHTBLAU: I was given a brief period to brush up on my French which I had studied as a young boy, but really I was given remarkably little briefing or preparation for the post. However, having already traveled for four or five months in Africa prior to assuming my post, and having already stopped off in Abidjan and in a number of other French-speaking African countries, I was able to fit in very quickly. In addition to the Ivory Coast, I also covered Upper Volta, which is now Burkina Faso, Niger, Togo, and Dahomey, which is now Benin. On a number of occasions I was also able to travel to other West African countries such as Senegal, Ghana, and Nigeria.

I had certain advantages in that I was very eager to contact people to talk with them. At the same time, none of the embassies had any particular framework of how a labor officer in an African country should operate. The only thing they had was an awareness that my work could be rather sensitive and a concern that my contacts and my moving around and meeting with people could be interpreted as American imperialist interference in the politics of these countries.

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Occasionally this did become a problem and there were from time to time complaints from the Ivorian government. But by and large I was able to establish wide and particularly good relations with the leadership of the African trade unions. Many of these people were very happy to take me around to their native towns and villages and to discuss with me their particular problems including sensitive relations with the government, economic problems, tribal conflicts, and so forth, which I widely reported. My reports were apparently received with considerable appreciation by the Department of State and the Department of Labor.

Q: George, what were the particular political and economic situations at the African posts that you were assigned to at that time?

LICHTBLAU: Then, as now, there was considerable tension, especially as the result of tribal conflicts in these countries, and this of course also had an impact on the labor movement. Another problem was the influx of migrant workers from neighboring countries into the relatively wealthy Ivory Coast. Then you had such problems as representatives of American firms complaining about government and union blackmail to pay off people. Also the government complained to the Embassy that I was spying and engaging in anti-government activities, which my Ambassador resented, but on the other hand, he couldn't do very much about it, since he did appreciate my being able to move around and talk to people. Later on, the Ivorian government's sensitivity was reflected in restricting the movement of diplomats and rather conspicuous surveillance of one's movements and contacts, which of course put me on my guard. As a result, the Ambassador became somewhat frustrated and felt that maybe the idea of having a labor attach# wasn't such a good idea.

The Ambassador was George Morgan, who, although he had considerable academic background, proved to be rather incompetent as a diplomat. This was not only reflected in my own judgment, but also in such episodes as government officials and other diplomats, particularly the Belgian Ambassador, whose wife was Ivorian, coming to me and telling me how [Ivorian] President Houphouet-Boigny felt that he could not communicate with our

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Ambassador because our Ambassador hardly spoke French. Also there were complaints about our Ambassador's behavior that put me in a rather delicate position, since it was not very easy to report such things to anybody in the Department.

At the same time of this overall frustration of the Ivorian government with our Ambassador, there were some complaints about my activities which were reflected reportedly in a statement of the Ivorian Foreign Minister to the Secretary of State. However, I felt that this did not reflect on my record or my future assignments at the time.

Q: George, can I break in for a second and ask what was the feeling of your fellow officers about your labor activities?

LICHTBLAU: I think my status and my relations with the Deputy Chief of Mission (DCM), and the acknowledgment of my good reporting and so forth were regarded rather highly, even though my relations with the Ambassador were not the best. This was also reflected in good efficiency reports.

Q: Who was the DCM at that time, and also the political officer? Can you recall?

LICHTBLAU: Alfred T. Wellborn was the DCM, but I can't remember the name of the political officer offhand. They have retired a long time ago.

Q: How long did you stay in Abidjan, George?

LICHTBLAU: I stayed in Abidjan from 1966 until the end of 1969

Q: During your stay in Abidjan, you only had one ambassador?

LICHTBLAU: No, shortly before I left, George Morgan was replaced.

Q: And what was the attitude of Ambassador Morgan towards labor?

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LICHTBLAU: I don't know. I really had very little to do with him. The only thing that I remember is certain admonitions to be cautious in traveling around the country, so that there would not be any complaints from the Ivorian government. Some of these complaints were rather strange. They came from a representative of the French intelligence to our CIA station chief rather than through formal embassy contacts.

[Let me mention] in this regard, a very peculiar incident. At one time, one of our visitors was a cousin of mine from New York. He worked for a contractor who had obtained a contract to remodel the then Russian Embassy in Abidjan before they broke of relations. I don't know how an American company got such a contract, but apparently it did. Of course we had this man over to dinner, and the next day I was immediately called in by the station chief who said, "How come?" and did I know that this guy was a Soviet spy? (laughter) I said that I didn't know that, and apparently the matter was then dropped. But it is a reflection of the climate of the times.

Q: George, could you tell us about the internal situation in the Ivory Coast at that time?

LICHTBLAU: I remember that I was well-received by the Ivorian trade union, the Union Generale du Travail de Cote d'Ivoire (UGTCI). A lot of the trade union leaders were rather eager to have a diplomat contact them and show a particular interest in what they were doing. They thought this gave them a certain amount of leverage. Many of them would invite me, take me around, and come and have lunch or come to social affairs.

I was also invited by them, not only in the capital of Abidjan, but also taken around to the various provinces, where people would tell me about their problems, both economic and political. During this time, there were a number of tense periods, particularly as a result of growing unemployment and economic depression during which people turned on immigrant workers. One particular target was the workers from Ghana, who had come in, as well as workers from Upper Volta and Niger, looking for jobs and who were working

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off the book, so to speak. There were some riots in which people were killed and it was at times rather tense.

The people, on the other hand, were also grateful to the American labor movement, particularly to the African-American Labor Center and to Irving Brown, who showed a growing interest in the trade union movement even though the movement tried to remain neutral and not affiliate directly with the ICFTU. Nevertheless, its political orientation was certainly more to the center-right and there was little evidence then of WFTU influence in the Ivory Coast.

This contrasted with the developments in some of the other countries, particularly in Togo and then Dahomey, now Benin, where visitors from the WFTU and Communist trade unions including the French [Communist] Confederation General du Travail (CGT) became quite obvious. In the Ivory Coast this anti-communist position was of course very much reflected in the breaking of diplomatic relations with the Soviet Union, I think, in 1967.

Q: After you finished your assignment in the Ivory Coast, George, did you go back to the Department or did you go on to another overseas labor job?

LICHTBLAU: When I came back from the Ivory Coast, I was given the choice of an assignment in Vietnam, which I turned down, and. . . What was the name of the guy who was then labor advisor [to the Secretary of State]?

Q: Phil Delaney?

LICHTBLAU: Yes. Phil Delaney put me on notice. As a result, as an African expert, I was assigned for one year to work with the Urban League in Washington helping black members to move into jobs, establish liaisons with trade union groups, and to get them both into jobs and into the trade union movement. This was an interesting year in which I was able to make a lot of contacts in the black community.

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Before the assignment ended, I was then transferred to the Office of Economic Opportunity (OEO), and also worked with American Indian groups on a similar program, traveling to various Indian reservations and meeting with urban Indian groups, particularly in Michigan and Wisconsin, which also was interesting. I formed some lasting friendships with a number of Indians, which still continue.

Then toward the end of 1971, I ran into an old friend, Ambassador Philip Habib, in the corridors [of the Department of State], who had just been assigned to the ambassadorship in Korea. He said, "Hey George, would you like to come and be labor attach# in Korea?" And I said, "Sure, why not?" And sure enough, early in 1972, I went to Korea.

Q: Where did you first meet Phil Habib?

LICHTBLAU: I worked with Phil Habib in INR in the Division of Functional Intelligence, when he was working on developments in Communist countries, and I was working on international labor affairs, which were, of course, topics that intertwined. So on a number of projects we worked together. When I got to Korea, Philip unfortunately had just had a heart attack, but a couple of months later he came back, and he certainly proved to be one of the best and most inspiring ambassadors that I have worked for.

Q: George, it must have been quite a switch from Africa to Korea.

LICHTBLAU: Yes, in many ways, it was. Korea proved a particularly interesting assignment. I worked there until 1975, and I certainly became one of the key officials in the Embassy and apparently established also quite a public reputation, because I was not only involved in labor affairs, but also in the human rights function in which I established active contacts with the American missionary community and also with Christian leaders to the point where I was periodically invited by Cardinal Kim, who would discuss with me the problems that the Catholic Church faced. I also had similar contacts with top Protestant leaders, many of whom were Americans since the Protestant church and Protestant

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missionaries from the American side had played an important role in Korea, particularly during the period of Japanese occupation, as a result of which America had a special psychological position in the minds of many Koreans.

Q: I also understand you were quite active in labor-management relations between our American troop installations there and the. . .

LICHTBLAU: I was also assigned to deal with labor relations between the Korean civilian employees of the U.S. Armed Forces as well as some American employees, particularly because the military was engaged in the habit of hiring American civilians or military retirees at low salary rates without any of the privileges. Well, they had PX privileges, but no pension rights and other fringe benefits that would have normally been accorded to civil servants. This became a rather tense issue which also involved American unions which were trying to represent these people. I got a good deal of support from Phil Habib trying to establish a pattern of great social sensitivity as subsequently the U.S. presence in Korea became increasingly resented by a lot of people.

Q: Did you receive visits from the International Trade Secretariats (ITSS) and representatives of the AFL-CIO or the Asian-American Free Labor Institute (AAFLI) at that time?

LICHTBLAU: Yes, I did work quite closely with AAFLI. We had, of course, a very serious problem in Korea because the government of Park Chung Hee became increasingly repressive and restrictive in the way it handled the Federation of Korean Trade Unions (FKTU). Also it became oppressive toward Christian labor groups, particularly the Young Christian Workers, a group apparently organized by some French Catholic missionaries. I became a pipeline of information into the Embassy on civil rights abuses and torture.

I still remember when I received information from some of my missionary contacts about the arrest of young labor leaders. My immediate superior tried to dismiss this, claiming that these missionaries were just using me. His concern was to maintain the best possible

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relations with the establishment. However, Ambassador Habib as well as the DCM backed me up and signaled their protest to the Korean government, as a result of which apparently the life of this young labor leader was saved, a matter which gave me a lot of status and prestige in the labor community and among the missionaries.

Q: George, how long was your assignment in Korea, and from Korea where did you go?

LICHTBLAU: My assignment in Korea went from 1972 to 1975. Then from 1975 to 1978, I was assigned to Israel. But I would like to elaborate somewhat more about my experience in Korea. Korea under President Park became increasingly a police state with everyone under surveillance and increasing restrictions being placed on the trade unions, their rights to collective bargaining, and so forth, and the surveillance of trade union leaders, with particular pressure being put on the Christian labor group, the Young Korean Christian Workers, and some of the Catholic and even some of the Protestant missionaries who were sympathetic to free labor and backing them.

I still remember being involved when the Korean government suppressed some of these missionaries, notably the American George Ogle, who had spent a good part of his life in Korea as a missionary with strong labor sympathies. He was a Methodist missionary. I remember one day I got a call that he was being told either to stop completely his activities or he would be deported. Then he was interrogated at Korean Central Intelligence Agency Headquarters. I called the DCM, Richard Ericson, and told him about it, and he asked me to go over to KCIA Headquarters and inquire what was going on. I walked over there, which was near the Embassy Residence area, and walked in, but was told I could not go up and meet with Ogle or his interrogators. As I was about to leave, a man came up to me and said, "I show you how you can get up there," and he pointed out a stairway in the back, and he said, "Go up to the second floor and the first door on your left will be the interrogation room." I walked up there and the interrogators were rather surprised to see me walk in. However, they remained polite and after a few minutes of routine questioning, George Ogle was permitted to go home.

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The next morning I received a call that the police were at his home again interrogating him, and about to deport him. I rushed over there and sat in on the continuing interrogation, and then I was told that he would be taken to the airport. Thereupon I accompanied his wife Dorothy to the airport, where he was put on a Korean Airlines plane to California.

However, this was not the only case in which I was involved in the deportation of the missionary. I remember a Catholic father who was very much involved with the young Christian workers, Jeunesse Ouvriere Chretienne (JOC), who was also deported shortly thereafter. Again, I tried to protect him and accompany him to the airport, but there was very little that the Embassy could do to stop these kind of measures.

Q: George, do you want to continue with your experiences in Korea? How were these activities received by the Embassy?

LICHTBLAU: I was involved in many other contacts, being taken to companies or being shown the kind of abuses that were going on by Korean companies, as well as by some foreign ventures including the General Motors plant where the American manager told me that all personnel questions and labor-relations questions were in the hands of the Koreans and therefore he could not interfere. Frequently, I would get reports of the arrests of young men, the failure of companies to pay wages, how workers were kept entrapped and locked in the places where they worked against their will, arbitrarily arrested.

I was impressed that so many Korean labor leaders were willing to take risks and talk to me about these matters. Very often, when I called, they would make arrangements in such a way that we would meet somewhere on the street walking around or in a park without telephone communications. Often these messages would come to me through a third person, and we would walk around and then discuss these matters. Obviously they were very happy to have a contact to whom they could voice their grievances and tell their experiences so that their message would get abroad.

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Often these people would say, "All right, in case we are being watched, what shall I say that you asked so that I can reply to the police or KCIA interrogators?" After we set out the general formula, he would then proceed to tell me what was really on his mind. This happened quite often and was not only limited to labor leaders, but also to some of my clergy contacts, including one of the bishops who would regularly contact me and arrange such informal meetings.

Obviously I was constantly under surveillance and I remember one day when President Ford came to Korea and we were all at a reception given by President Park Chung Hee. When I was introduced to him, Park Chung Hee said, "Oh, I know exactly who you are." (laughter) So I clearly had a reputation.

However, Ambassador Habib made it quite clear that he had full confidence in me and that he fully supported my activities and wanted me to do this kind of work. He also told the CIA Station Chief in the Embassy to lay off my contacts because at times they would go and ask people and thereby arouse suspicions that I, too, was part of the CIA and not part of the regular Embassy staff. This was a matter that came up on a number of occasions. As a matter of fact, in some of the more radical missionary and labor circles, I was suspected of being a CIA agent, and I remember that some pamphlets were distributed claiming to expose the CIA officers in the Embassy in which not only my name was included, but also that of my wife. (laughter)

Q: Do you want to continue with Korea, George?

LICHTBLAU: My situation changed very drastically when Ambassador Habib was replaced by Ambassador Richard L. Sneider. Ambassador Sneider was very much interested in improving relations between the United States and the Korean Government, which had become somewhat suspicious about the role of the Embassy, which in turn had become increasingly critical of the repressive activities of the Park regime. Ambassador Sneider operated in such a way that he just did not want to be seen together with me. Often this

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would take the form that he did not even want me to ride with him in the same elevator and would make all kinds of remarks like, "Stay away from me," and "I don't want you to go out and see these people, because that discredits the Embassy."

However, both the Department, when Phil Habib had become Assistant Secretary for East Asia, and the DCM felt I should continue my work. Ambassador Sneider pressed that I be replaced and reassigned as soon as possible. I was promoted to FSRU-2 and then assigned to Israel.

Q: Did you have any kind of a layover in the United States before you went to Israel?

LICHTBLAU: No, I went directly from Korea to Israel.

Q: And how did you find the political climate there?

LICHTBLAU: This was an exciting period because it was just about the time of the Camp David Agreement and all the events leading up to that which made things rather interesting there. In some ways, of course, here too there were a lot of critical issues to which I was pressed both on the labor and the human rights situation.

The two major events during my service in Israel were first of all the replacement of the Labor government by a Likud government, which came somewhat unexpectedly, since everybody assumed that the Labor Party was deeply entrenched and that a changeover was very unlikely. Then of course came the peace negotiations with Egypt and the visit of President Sadat to Israel and to Jerusalem, and subsequently the negotiations that led up to Camp David.

Here again, I think my role was generally appreciated by the Embassy because of my extensive contacts and my ability to report not only on matters that were covered in the press and in public announcements, but also in dealing with the different segments of the community, both Jewish and Arab, as well as the various immigrant groups. Getting to

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know people such as the Russian immigrant community and also the Sephardic groups, the groups that had immigrated from North Africa and the Arab countries, some of whom felt a little bit frustrated because of a sense of neglect, and a tendency to give preferential treatment and the benefits of patronage to those [Jewish immigrants] who had come from Europe.

I was also able to establish a number of contacts with various elements of the non-Jewish Arab community in Israel and, from time to time, I was also sent to make contacts with Palestinian groups in the occupied territories, since human rights was one of the areas that were assigned to me. At times, this ran into a problem on the American side because of the unclarified areas of jurisdiction between the Embassy and the Consulate in Jerusalem, which was assigned primary responsibility for the occupied territories, Judea, Samaria, Gaza, and East Jerusalem.

In dealing with the Arab groups, I particularly remember my contacts with the Druze community and with the Bedouin community, where I established a number of friendly relations and was a number of times invited to meet with them and hear their particular problems and their particular views, which were sometimes different from those of the other Arab elements. They obviously were less inclined to be critical of the Israelis. Some of their members were permitted to serve in the military and the police force. They also had more ready access to the civil service, which sometimes also engendered certain jealousies and frictions among them.

Q: George, how did your fellow officers and colleagues in the Embassy view your activities, and were there any times when you were working at cross purposes?

LICHTBLAU: I think generally in Israel I seemed to have had a pretty good reputation because of my extensive contacts and my circulation outside of the Embassy which probably were more extensive than those of most other officers. Also the Ambassador seemed to have appreciated that, particularly Ambassador Lewis, who was a bit upset

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when I left. He wanted me to extend my service there, but considering how close I was at that time to mandatory retirement at 60, I did not want to extend, and so in the summer of 1978, I left for an assignment back in the Department of State as NEA Labor Advisor.

Q: How many ambassadors did you work for in Tel Aviv?

LICHTBLAU: Two ambassadors. The first ambassador was Malcolm Toon, and then Sam Lewis. I had good relations with both of them and for a while under Sam Lewis, I was Acting Head of the Political Section, since I was really the ranking officer in the Political Section.

Q: George, why don't we talk about your next assignment which I understand was very, very interesting.

LICHTBLAU: My next assignment was, as I already mentioned, as NEA Labor Advisor. In that capacity, I traveled around extensively in the region and made several visits, both to Israel as well as to the Arab countries, and also to North Africa where I reported on the labor situation, particularly the problems of migrant workers, their treatment, employment opportunities, and training programs. Some of these were supported under the Agency for International Development (AID) by the U.S. Government, and some of these were also supplemented by funds provided by the Government of Saudi Arabia.

I remember one peculiar problem was that for one year the Department directory of Foreign Service Officers had me assigned to various American embassies in Arab countries including Jordan, Saudi Arabia, and the Gulf States. A number of the embassies were concerned both about my name and the fact that I had served in Israel. Then my name was removed from the list.

Q: It must have been difficult, George, to work with many of these people in the embassies in Arab countries, where trade union activity or trade unions themselves were absolutely prohibited or greatly restricted.

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LICHTBLAU: In my contacts, of course, I was always treated very politely and very well because of the code of Arab and Islamic hospitality, particularly to somebody who enjoys international status. I also remember that in a number of countries, including Saudi Arabia, Kuwait, and Bahrain, I had contact with Palestinians or ex-Palestinians, who would very openly tell me about their frustrations and fears about their exploitation by their host country. I was often surprised how readily people would open up to me in expounding their problems. I particularly remember the stories I heard in Kuwait from Palestinians and how frustrated they were.

Q: Did you visit Saudi Arabia during your tour of duty?

LICHTBLAU: Yes, I made an extensive trip to Saudi Arabia and there, too, I got all kinds of stories from different guest worker groups to whom I was introduced. At the same time, however, I was struck that the Embassy was not too eager to have me travel around. They were somewhat concerned, I suppose, about having a Jewish officer travel around, although I received no such questions or negative reactions on the part of my Saudi contacts.

Q: How did you find the human rights situation in Saudi Arabia at that time?

LICHTBLAU: Well, the only things that I really dealt with at the time were the guest workers' problems and how they were treated, and I got a few stories from some of the Palestinians who told me that they were being blackmailed about rent payments and about what they had to do to keep in good grace with their Saudi Arabian sponsors. And of course they made very clear that they had to do all the work, whereas the Saudis were simply acting as their patrons, sipping coffee and tea all day long and sitting around socializing and doing very little work, whereas they had to do all of the work.

Q: Were you in contact with DOLITAC or the Department of Labor international training specialists?

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LICHTBLAU: Yes, this was a program that was to be partly financed by grants from the Saudi Arabian Government and I looked into that. They would train guest workers from Yemen and from Egypt as well as some Palestinians. It was also interesting talking to some government officials of Palestinian origin and others who were Western educated who expressed to me their concern about the treatment of women, even educated women, and the restrictions that were put on their professional abilities. This was also a source of frustration on the part of these people who were interviewed.

Q: Did you visit Iraq at that time?

LICHTBLAU: No, I never went to Iraq.

Q: But you had an extended trip to Yemen as I recall.

LICHTBLAU: Yes, I did go to Yemen. That was rather interesting, and I traveled around the country, which is fabulously beautiful. Among other assignments that I was asked to do was to contact what was left of the Jewish community. I did have a few contacts, talking to people. I also had arranged as well for the distribution of some Hebrew prayer books to these people, and then also I arranged with the Embassy and with the Foreign Ministry that such texts would be distributed, not only to the few that I could contact in Sanaa, but also in some of the more outlying areas. At that time one of the Hasidic groups in New York had established contacts with the Yemeni government and subsequently one of their rabbis did go and visit Yemen. Then more regular contacts were established between the Yemeni-Jewish community and Jewish community groups in the United States.

On my return from Yemen, I then went to Israel, where I had some contacts in the Yemeni Jewish community, particularly with the [then Deputy] General Secretary of the Histadrut, Israel Kessar, who was fascinated by my stories and greatly appreciative that I could bring them this news of my direct contacts.

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Q: How did you find the human rights situation in Yemen compared to, say, various other Arab countries you visited?

LICHTBLAU: I really did not have much opportunity to discuss that in great detail. In Yemen, the principal concern was the large number of Yemeni guest workers in Saudi Arabia and all the other oil producing countries, [and ensuring] that they would be entitled to send in their remittances to help sustain their families. That was one of their primary preoccupations. Here, again, I checked into our training program through the Department of Labor international training corps.

Q: Did the U.S. Department of Labor have people assigned to Yemen, and did you come across them?

LICHTBLAU: I don't remember in any great detail anymore the exact nature of the program. I think there were also some Peace Corps volunteers involved. Traveling around in Yemen, I did talk to a number of Peace Corps volunteers about the situation which principally dealt with economic problems rather than so-called "human rights" problems. Of course Yemen at the time was still a rather authoritarian regime. The introduction of a multi-party reform came almost a decade later, which also then led to the unification of the two Yemens.

The rights issue into which I looked was of course that of the Jewish community and there these people were tightly controlled. Their movements were circumscribed and here again they also had to pay money in order to protect their situation. Also there were complaints about forced marriages of Jewish girls to Moslems. There were stories of kidnappings and so forth. However, while I was given some written reports, in their conversations the three or four members of the Jewish community with whom I talked were very cautious in how they expressed themselves, although they greatly appreciated that for the first time in decades, somebody from the outside world had come to contact them.

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Q: George, why don't we talk a bit about your visits to Morocco, Tunisia, and Egypt. How did you find the trade union situation in these countries?

LICHTBLAU: I visited both Morocco and Tunisia and there I was very well received by the trade unions. In Morocco particularly I remember Ben Sadih, who was extremely hospitable and took me around, and they even invited me to stay at one of their union hotels. I was impressed by the luxury and the privileges that the top union leaders enjoyed.

In Tunisia, I became involved in the human rights situation and particularly was asked to visit some of the internment camps, where I talked to young interned students. I remember at that time, which must have been, I guess, in 1979, there was a growing concern about human rights violations in Tunisia. I also talked to some members of the opposition parties and opposition groups who were rather frustrated, both over the political situation as well as the economic situation and the unemployment. I was rather surprised that the Tunisian Government permitted me to go into the internment camps and let me talk to the young internees. They all spoke fluent French and were obviously of middle-class origin and therefore politically active. I also remember that people would approach me on the street as a foreigner and want to talk to me about their grievances and their problems when they found out that I was an American diplomat.

Q: Did we have a labor officer in Tunisia at that time?

LICHTBLAU: I think the first time I was in Tunisia the labor officer was Terry Todman, [later] Ambassador Terry Todman. But I cannot recall whether my visits to these camps and so forth were at that time or during some other visits, since I went there several times.

Q: And what about relations between the Tunisian trade union movement and the government?

LICHTBLAU: Well, I think that the official trade union obviously enjoyed the patronage of the government. At that time the Tunisian trade union movement was quite actively

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committed to the ICFTU and had contacts with Irving Brown and the American labor movement. They still remembered that George Meany had helped Bourguiba go into asylum in the United States during the independence struggle.

Q: What about the role of the fundamentalists at that time?

LICHTBLAU: That I was not really able to look into. At that time, it was not that much of a concern.

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Q: Good afternoon, George. Here we are again. This is February 13, 1992. Let's see what kind of results we can get this time. I think you had come back from Israel when we finished off and were working in the NEA Bureau, if I am not mistaken.

LICHTBLAU: Yes, I came back from Israel in August or September 1978 and then I became the NEA Labor Advisor and also I was put in charge of human rights. As a result, I became quite busy. I was also sent around on a number of trips through the Middle East, not only to Israel, but also to North Africa, particularly Morocco and Tunisia, and then Egypt, Jordan, Saudi Arabia, Yemen, and then Bahrain and Kuwait. These are the countries that I remember visiting. Checking on the labor situations in these countries as well as the problem of guest workers which was becoming an increasingly important problem as well as an issue throughout the Middle East and particularly in the oil-producing countries which were drawing large numbers of workers from neighboring Arab and Middle East countries. Often these people were kept under close surveillance. There was also a problem of abuse in terms of what they were getting paid, how much work they had to do, restrictions on their movements, and so forth.

Q: George, I think I saw a figure of three million Egyptian workers working in the Gulf countries. I've often been impressed that, as I understand it, this is the source of the greatest foreign currency earning for the Egyptian economy.

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LICHTBLAU: That is correct. There are even now about a million and a half Egyptian workers working in Libya in the petroleum industry and then there were almost two million workers in Iraq. As a matter of fact, not too long before the Gulf War, as a result of Iraqi demobilization following the war in Iran, returning soldiers wanted to take over the jobs of expatriate workers, particularly Egyptians. This resulted in riots and people being killed, and for a while the Iraqis blocked the transmission of remittances to Egypt. Later on I think this was straightened out. Nevertheless, hundreds of thousands of Egyptians were forced to return to Egypt, a country which by that time was, of course, in serious economic difficulty.

I remember also talking to Palestinians, both in Saudi Arabia and in Kuwait, who bitterly complained about how they were exploited in their particular situations in terms of how much they were forced to pay for housing, and that they were at times blackmailed into escalating these housing costs and so forth. This became quite a problem and, as a matter of fact, some Saudi officials I talked to, one of them in particular who was himself of Palestinian origin but had achieved a sub-cabinet level position, also complained about what was happening to his countrymen.

Q: George, what kind of a reception did you get from the indigenous officials in these countries, many of which have a long history of violations of human rights?

LICHTBLAU: There is of course always the question of Arab hospitality which is an important factor in how they will behave towards you and how they will welcome you, even if they have reservations and resentments about you. So I must say that I was really surprised how friendly a welcome I received and even people inviting me to their house for meals and introducing me to their wives and other family members. I already had some of that experience from my earlier assignment in Africa, particularly in the Sahel countries where I had very similar experiences with people of Berber origin or Tuaregs and so forth in places like Niger and Upper Volta, now Burkina Faso.

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Q: Did you find any concept of trade unions in these countries?

LICHTBLAU: There were no trade unions in Saudi Arabia. However, in other countries, yes, there were unions, and I did meet with union representatives, and particularly in places like Egypt where unions played both an important political role as well as economic role running enterprises which was not unlike the pattern in Israel. I remember going to trade union-owned textile mills and carpet weaving places and so forth. I had similar experiences visiting Tunisia and Morocco. There, too, cooperatives and union-run enterprises were quite common. The unions were of course proud of this and showed this off to me.

Q: My experience is that in the countries that were former French colonies, the unions were quite strong and more or less along our own lines.

LICHTBLAU: Yes, the unions were quite strong and enjoyed, of course, a considerable amount of government patronage. However, in all these unions there were also some detached groups with considerable grievances and resentments against the government. Sometimes it was difficult to determine who was clandestine and who wasn't. But I do remember particularly in Tunisia being invited by some of the union-linked opposition groups. But they were obviously very cautious and tried to avoid publicizing our contact. I understand that now the original government-sponsored unions have also changed in the quality of their relations with the established governments, given the economic and political grievances in these countries.

Q: I could never get a grip on the Egyptian concept of trade unions. I often wondered if they were just collaborators of the state, or did they have some degree of independence, and did they ever exercise the right to strike?

LICHTBLAU: I don't particularly remember whether there were strikes. However, and this is one of the peculiar characteristics of unions in developing countries, on the one

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hand, until very recently, trade unions were substantially dominated and controlled by the ruling party; but on the other hand, trade unionism was also a form of detachment from the establishment engendering pressure groups for handling grievances and also linking the aggrieved opposition groups or economically disadvantaged groups.

Sometimes these relationships would be under the cover of religious ties to a particular sect. In Islam, interestingly, this was not all that different from experiences I had in places like Korea where the Buddhist labor groups were independent of the established Korean Trade Union Federation and playing different roles, having different demands, pressing also more for competitive arrangements and shared ownership between the labor groups and management. In Korea, there were also, of course, the very important Christian trade union groups such as the young Christian workers or Jeunesse Ouvriere Chre#tienne (JOC), who were an important opposition faction, and because of their religious ties, there were restraints on how far the government could go in suppressing or controlling these groups.

Q: Why don't we continue with your experiences in the NEA Bureau?

LICHTBLAU: Aside from traveling around, I would, of course, review reports from the countries under the Bureau's jurisdiction. If there were important developments relating to U.S. interests and policy, I would report these to the Assistant Secretary. We would discuss developments at the staff meetings, and then I would write up regional reports for the Assistant Secretary.

I would also deal with visitors from the countries under my jurisdiction or under the Bureau's jurisdiction. Then I would establish a liaison with the Department of Labor's Division of Foreign Labor Conditions as well as with other government agencies that were dealing with Middle East political and economic affairs.

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Q: Is there anything else you want to add, George, before we wind this up? Do you think we've covered everything?

LICHTBLAU: One other thing in connection with the trade unions and developments that I discussed in the Middle East. The role of the trade unions being also entrepreneurial and shared ownership and cooperative aspects in their socialist leanings has led recently now to an increasing number of experiments with the ESOP or Employee Shared Ownership Plans, whereby, in addition to salaries, the employees are also earning shares as part of their savings, and in a number of cases they also gain a participatory role in the management of these companies.

End of interview